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COMMUNITY IMPROVEMENT:

SOME SUGGESTED STRATEGIES FOR SOLVING PROBLEMS IN PINE LAWN

For presentation on November 27, 1972
at the Pine Lawn City Hall to a joint
meeting of the Pine Lawn Chamber of
Commerce, Residents' Council, Local
Governmental Officials, and Citizens.

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We have been following with a great deal of interest the recent continuing discussions in Pine Lawn of the community's most pressing problems and how best to solve them. In response to a request from the Pine Lawn Chamber of Commerce, we met with the Chamber on October 19 at the University of Missouri-St. Louis. At that meeting, we discussed our ideas about possible strategies for solving some of the problems currently confronting Pine Lawn. Tonight we have been asked to share these ideas with you.

From our discussions with Chamber members and various Pine Lawn residents, we have concluded the following about the community and its problems. It appears that the major problem facing the community revolves around the issue of how to retain Pine Lawn's population and tax base in the face of rather rapid population change, particularly the infusion of a sizeable black population into the community. The community appears committed to: (1) maintaining a relatively stable population by retaining the present racial and class mixture, and (2) improving the local business climate to retain present businesses and attract new ones. We did not perceive that the people of Pine Lawn wanted to significantly change the type or level of government services presently offered, or to significantly change the kind of residential community Pine Lawn has become over the years. Working within these parameters, we suggest five areas in which improvements could be undertaken.

COMMUNITY FACILITIES

What follows are suggestions concerning the development and operation of various community-wide facilities:

(1) Community Center. The facility could become an important physical and symbolic focal point for the community. Ongoing programs for youth and for senior citizens could be conducted in such a community center. Besides housing ongoing programs for youth and senior citizens, a community center could become a focal point for leisure activities for young and old alike. It could also be used as a physical facility for ad hoc community events. Important for the successful operation of a community center is a paid staff which would assume responsibility for the ongoing operation of the building as well as coordinate and promote various programs within the center. A full-time staff person housed in the center could also be available to spearhead community development activities elsewhere in the city, provided there is supplementary volunteer or low-paid help available to maintain the center.

Specific youth activities that could be run out of a youth center include community-wide sport teams, sponsored by area businesses, and a Junior Achievement type of program to develop business skills among young people.

(2) Medical Center. This facility, built by the city, could be leased to private physicians and could be used to attract medical services to the community. Also, it would house special clinic programs on a subsidized basis for special kinds of check-ups, immunizations, or other specialized services. The city need not play an active role in running such a facility if proper support is obtained from St. Louis County and area medical schools. This kind of facility not only adds to the general

attractiveness of the community as a place to live, but provides a real service especially for residents with limited means of transportation.

(3) Recreational Areas. A third kind of development that would benefit the community is a sizeable park with a variety of recreational facilities. Such a facility would provide both a physical and symbolic focal point for the community as well as an activity area for all age groups. Playground facilities for young children and sport facilities for older children are needed to supplement those now available in the school yard. Picnic areas in a general park setting would also be of benefit. Since such recreational areas are difficult to restrict to Pine Lawn residents, St. Louis County should be prodded to sponsor this development, perhaps using federal funds.

COMMUNITY BEAUTIFICATION

A second major area of community activity would involve general maintenance and upgrading the physical attractiveness of Pine Lawn. There is a general tendency to disregard physical surroundings. The physical environment, however, has a very real impact on the image projected by the community, both to residents and non-residents. A clean and pleasant, but not necessarily fancy, physical environment tends to increase resident's pride in their homes and community. Such beautification efforts need not be expensive and can be accomplished in the following ways:

- (1) Installation of street lighting;
- (2) Installation and/or maintenance of roads, sidewalks, and curbs;
- (3) Pick-up of litter in public areas;
- (4) Development of parks as described earlier;
- (5) Painting and generally maintaining the exterior of private homes and yards;
- (6) Demolition of derelict buildings;

- (7) Conversion of vacant land into parks or new buildings;
- (8) Maintenance of vacant land by cutting grass, picking-up litter, etc.; and
- (9) Planting grass, trees, flowers and shrubs along streets and in private yards.

The role of the city's government varies for each of these beautification efforts. Primarily, the city should both promote and facilitate attention to these matters by property owners and through volunteer work. For example, home maintenance could be facilitated by a home owner consulting service, to be described in the next section. Installation and/or maintenance of roads, installation of street lighting, and development of parks all require action by the city's government, but outside funds could be secured to finance some aspects of these developments.

The general thrust of community beautification is to make the community appear a pleasant, enjoyable, and vital place to live. This can be accomplished both by the elimination of physical blight, such as abandoned businesses and homes, run-down buildings, etc., and through the development of physical features -- lighting, parks, a community center, etc.

HOUSING DEVELOPMENT

Housing is the core of a residential community like Pine Lawn. The housing stock now available in the community appears to be basically sound. Without proper attention, however, houses in Pine Lawn could easily deteriorate. Steps must be taken to prevent housing deterioration. For example:

- (1) Housing Survey. A general survey of housing quality should be undertaken. The intent of a survey would be to identify areas of housing deterioration plus the exact nature and extent of such deterioration. On the basis of these findings, recommendations for coping with existing and/or preventing future housing deterioration would be developed.

(2) Homeowner Consultation Service. This service could provide free consultation and advice on various aspects of maintaining and remodeling requests for advice by going directly into the home and pointing out how to make necessary repairs, how to refinish, how to carry out inexpensive remodeling, how to carry out preventative maintenance, etc. Advice about inexpensive materials and contractors could also be offered, if requested. Perhaps a pool of major electrical tools could be made available for loan or for a small charge. This kind of service would be especially useful for new homeowners who have not had the experience of owning and maintaining a home. A pool of retired citizens in the community might be recruited to do volunteer work in this service, sharing their long experience as homeowners.

(3) Volunteer Home Maintenance (Fix-Up). Some home maintenance and fix-up tasks can not be handled physically by homeowners who are elderly or disabled. Also, some tasks require more than one person to complete. For these programs, a volunteer home maintenance (fix-up) service could mobilize the manpower of youth and the skills of the retired to provide free assistance to community homeowners.

(4) Remodeling Loan Service. In addition to consultation and advice on how to do remodeling, many homeowners will need financial assistance as well. A loan service could assist residents in obtaining home improvement loans in the commercial market. Information could be offered about where loans are available and what terms are reasonable.

In addition to such assistance in dealing with the open financial market, the remodeling loan service could also have some funds available to loan directly in cases where the commercial market refuses to make a loan. Many commercial loan institutions are reluctant to make a loan in an area like Pine Lawn, at least at reasonable rates. The community as a

whole, therefore, suffers from such restrictions. A direct community loan program, utilizing a revolving short-term loan fund, could serve a real community need.

(5) Occupancy Permit Enforcement. Another way to maintain the quality of housing stock is to enforce an occupancy permit regulation. The city's code requirements regarding (1) the number of persons allowed to reside in each dwelling unit and (2) the physical condition of the unit should be reviewed in light of current conditions in the community to assure that if all code requirements are attained, the community will not be subject to deterioration.

(6) Home Mortgage Review. Other communities similar in many ways to Pine Lawn, have suffered immensely from the operation of the home mortgage market. Such areas get "red-lined" for normal housing loans, and housing money becomes available only through federal programs for low-income families or through exorbitant loan terms. The net effect is to drive away new residents who are similar to existing residents, and instead bring in new homeowners who are financially unable to maintain their homes. This often arises as a result of the exorbitant terms of home financing itself. It results in an influx of new residents who have minimal attachment to the community and who probably will not long remain in the area.

We do not know if such conditions now exist in the home mortgage market in Pine Lawn. We do recommend, however, that an investigation be made of the mortgage market in Pine Lawn and its effects. If the above conditions do exist, the community should spell out some strategy to curb its most destructive consequences.

(7) Resident Survey. A general aid to community problem solving is to monitor the attitudes and concerns of present, former, and potential or new residents in Pine Lawn. Present residents could be asked about

their own plans, both short range or long, for staying or moving, and their reasons for such plans. Former residents could be asked why they decided to move. Potential residents, although difficult to identify, could be asked for their attitudes toward Pine Lawn as a community in which to settle. This kind of information could be useful to the city's policy makers and help them in identifying the attractive as well as the unattractive features of the community, as well as the interests and concerns of Pine Lawn residents. Future programs for the community could be developed on the basis of the results of such a survey.

(8) Home Buyer's Advisory Service (Pine Lawn Residential Service).

This service could provide prospective home buyers with useful information about all aspects of the community. An attractive information brochure on the community could be prepared for distribution to real estate agents. In addition, this service could answer questions from prospective home buyers. Pine Lawn has many attractive features which should be more widely known. In addition, such a community service can demonstrate to prospective buyers that Pine Lawn is a community that is proud of its accomplishments and is working to maintain itself as an attractive place for people to live. Finally, such an advisory service could monitor the practices of the real estate firms operating in the community.

BUSINESS DEVELOPMENT

Pine Lawn has been experiencing departures of business concerns. Although some new businesses such as carry-out food establishments have recently moved into the community, abandoned business sites suggest a net decrease in business establishments. Some of this decrease is simply a consequence of changes in the overall economy, which disadvantage small shops. Therefore, Pine Lawn should probably not only be concerned with

preserving existing businesses but also look broadly at the question of the types of businesses which can prosper in this kind of community. In so doing, it should examine the number and types of businesses which the community needs for important services, tax revenues, and employment opportunities. The following steps could usefully be undertaken:

(1) Business Development Committee. This Committee could take prime responsibility for assessing business needs and opportunities in Pine Lawn and for seeking out parties interested in establishing businesses in the city. With factual information on market potential, business sites, manpower resources, and business financing, this Committee would be in a good position to offer useful consultation to prospective businessmen about the business opportunities in Pine Lawn. Special attention could be given to researching the opportunities for minority businessmen. Attention should also be given to shops and services that would add to the convenience of living in the community. One product of this Committee could be an attractive brochure on the business conditions and opportunities in Pine Lawn.

The existence of such a Committee is useful not only for the tasks outlined above but also a useful way to symbolize to non-residents as well as to Pine Lawn residents that the community has a vital and active business community.

(2) Business Advisory Service. This Service could make available to small businessmen, especially new ones, advice on business procedures and financing. Expertise is available from established businessmen in the community as well as from several outside sources. It is in the interest of the community to assure the continuing prosperity of businesses. Many of the pitfalls of opening a new business could be avoided through such advising.

Another important service that could be provided is advice and

information about small business financing. Information on availability of loans, and about reasonable financing schemes could be provided.

HUMAN RELATIONS

A final area into which community effort should be directed would involve human relations. Experience in other communities undergoing racial transition demonstrates the utility and feasibility of easing racial tensions through concerted community effort -- of reducing the friction that undoubtedly arises with the new racial mix of the community. A human relations effort can develop general community programs to increase inter-racial understanding, to investigate cases of interracial strife, and to assure that there is no racial discrimination in any aspect of community life. Racial transition is a new and unknown phenomenon for most residents, new and old alike, and fears and anxieties can make a community an unattractive place for all races. Many fears and anxieties are probably unfounded, and efforts at improving interracial understanding can do much to remove these. Other fears and anxieties arise from real situations, and a community should have a mechanism capable of solving interracial problems before they escalate.

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These suggestions are intended to indicate our understanding of Pine Lawn's situation, and to suggest programs of action. Community Extension at the University of Missouri-St. Louis has, or can obtain from co-operating academic departments, expertise in all of these areas. We are very interested in making these human resources available to the city. We are also interested in working with residents in identifying and analyzing community problems, and developing appropriate strategies for dealing with these problems.